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THE SOUL OF A NATION



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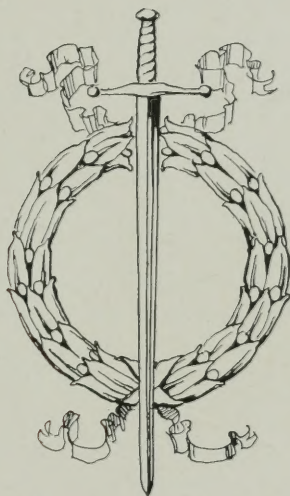
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THE SOUL OF A NATION

BY SIR PHILLIP GIBBS

Author of *"Now it may be told"*



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It did not seem an unknown warrior whose body came on a gun carriage down Whitehall, where we were waiting for him. He was known to us all. It was one of "our boys" (not warriors), as we called them in the days of darkness lit by faith.

To some women, weeping a little in the crowd after an all-night vigil, he was their boy who went missing one day and was never found till now, though their souls went searching for him through the dreadful places in the night.

To many men among those packed densely on each side of the empty street wearing ribbons and badges on civil clothes, he was a familiar figure, one of their comrades, the one they liked best, perhaps, in the old crowd who into the fields of death went and stayed there with a great companionship.

It was a steel helmet, an old "tin hat," lying there on the crimson of the flag, which revealed him instantly, not as a mythical warrior, aloof from common humanity, a shadowy type of national pride and martial glory, but as one of those fellows, dressed in the drab of khaki, stained by mud and grease, who went into dirty ditches with this steel hat on his head, and in his heart unspoken things which made him one of us in courage and in fear, with some kind of faith, not clear, full of perplexities, often dim in the watchwords of those years of war.

So it seemed to me, at least, as I looked down Whitehall and listened to the music which told us that the Unknown was coming down the road. The band was playing the old "Dead March in Saul" with heavy drumming, but as yet the roadway was clear where it led up to that altar of sacrifice, as it looked, covered by two flags hanging in long folds of scarlet and white.

About that altar-cenotaph there were little groups of strange people, all waiting for the dead soldier. Why were they there, these people? There were great folk to greet the dust of a simple soldier. There was the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Bishop of London, and other clergy in gowns and hoods. What had they to do with the body of the soldier who had gone trudging through the mud and muck

like one ant in a legion of ants, unknown to fame, not more heroic, perhaps, than all his pals about him, not missed much when he fell dead between the tangled wire and shell holes? There were great Generals and Admirals, Lord Haig himself, Commander-in-Chief of our armies in France, and Admiral Beatty, who held the seas; Lord French of Ypres, with Horne of the First Army, and Byng of the Third, and Air Marshal Trenchard, who had commanded all the birds that flew above the lines on mornings of enormous battle.

These were high powers, infinitely remote, perhaps, in the imagination of the man whose dust was now being brought toward them. It was their brains that had directed his movements down the long roads which galled his feet, over ground churned up by gunfire, up the duckboards, from which he slipped under his heavy pack, if he were a foot-slogger, and, whatever his class as a soldier, ordained at last the end of his journey, which finished in the grave marked by the metal disc. Unknown in life, he had looked upon these Generals as terrifying in their power "for the likes of him." Sometimes, perhaps, he had saluted them as they rode past. Now they stood in Whitehall to salute him, to keep silence in his presence, to render him homage more wonderful, with deeper reverence, than any General of them all has had.

There were Princes there about the cenotaph, not only of England, but of the Indian Empire. These Indian Rajahs, that old white-bearded, white-turbaned man, with the face of an Eastern prophet, was it possible they, too, were out to pay homage to the unknown British soldier? There was something of the light of Flanders in Whitehall—the strange light that the tattered ruins of the Cloth Hall at Ypres used to shine with through the mist—suffused a little by wan sunlight, white as the walls and turrets of the War Office in the mist of London. The tower of Big Ben was dim through the mist like the tower of Albert Church until it fell into a heap of dust under the fury of gunfire. Presently the sun shone brighter, so that the picture of Whitehall was etched with deeper lines. On all the buildings flags were flying at half-mast.

The people who kept moving about the cenotaph were there for mourning, not for mere pageantry. Grenadier officers who walked about with drawn swords wore crepe on

THE SOUL OF A NATION

their arms. Presently they passed the word along "Reverse arms!" and all along the line of route soldiers turned over their rifles and bent their heads over the butts. It was when the music of the Dead March came louder up the street.

A number of black figures stood in a separate group, apart from the Admirals and Generals, people of importance, to whom the eyes of the crowd turned, while men and women tiptoed to get a glimpse of them. The Prime Minister and the Ministers and ex-Ministers of Britain were there. Asquith, Lord Curzon and other statesmen, who, in those years of conflict, were responsible for all the mighty effort of the nation, who stirred up its passions and emotions, who organized its labor and service, who won that victory and this peace. I thought the people about me stared at them as though conscious of the task that is theirs, now that peace is the test of victory.

But it was one figure who stood alone as the symbol of the nation in this tribute to the spirit of our dead. As Big Ben struck three-quarters after 10, the King advanced toward the cenotaph, followed by the Prince of Wales, the Prince's two brothers, and the Duke of Connaught, and while others stood in line looking toward the top of Whitehall, the King was a few paces ahead of them, alone, waiting, motionless, for the body of the Unknown Warrior who had died in his service.

It was very silent in Whitehall, and before this ordered silence the dense lines of people kept their places without movement, only spoke little in their long time of waiting, and then, as they caught their first glimpse of the gun carriage, were utterly quiet. All heads were bared and bent. Their emotion was as though a little cold breeze were passing. One seemed to feel the spirit of the crowd. Above all this mass of plain people something touched one with a sharp yet softening touch.

The massed bands passed with their noble music and their drums thumping at the hearts of men and women, the Guards with their reversed arms, and then the gun carriage, with its team of horses, halted in front of the cenotaph, where the King stood, and the Royal hand was raised to salute the soldier who had died that we might live, chosen by fate for this honor, which is in remembrance of that great army of comrades who went out with him to No Man's Land. The

THE SOUL OF A NATION

King laid a wreath on his coffin and then stepped back again.

Crowded behind the gun carriage in one long vista was an immense column of men of all branches of the navy and army, moving up slowly before coming to a halt, and behind again other men in civil clothes, and everywhere among them and above them were flowers in the form of wreaths and crosses. Then all was still, and the picture was complete, framing in that coffin, where the steel hat and the King's sword lay upon the flag which draped it. The soul of the nation at its best, purified at this moment by this emotion, was there, in silence, about the dust of that Unknown.

Guns were being fired somewhere in the distance. They were not loud, but like the distant thumping of the guns on a misty day in Flanders when there was "nothing to report," though on such a day, perhaps, this man had died.

Presently there was a far-off wailing, like the cry of a banshee. It was a siren giving the warning of silence in some place by the river. The deep notes of Big Ben struck 11, and then the King turned quickly to the lever behind him, touched it, and let fall the great flags which had draped it. A grim, hard thing, like a pagan altar, as it seems to me, the cenotaph stood revealed, utterly austere, except for three standards, with their gilt wreaths.

It was a time of silence. What thoughts were in the minds of all the people only God knows, as they stood there for those two minutes, which were very long. There was a dead stillness in Whitehall, only broken here and there by the coughing of a man or a woman, quickly hushed.

The Unknown Warrior! Was it young Jack, perhaps, who had never been found? Was it one of those fellows in the battalion that moved up through Ypres before the height of the battle in the bogs? Men were smoking, this side of Ypres. One could see the glow of their cigarette ends as they were halted round the old mill house at Vlamertinghe. It rained after that, beating sharply on the tin hats, pouring in spouts down waterproof capes. They went out through Menin Gate. The shelling began along the duckboards by Westhoek Ridge, gas shelling, every old thing. Fellows dropped into shell holes, full of water. They had their packs on, all their fighting kit. Some of them lay there in the pits, where the water was reddish.

There were a lot of unknown warriors in the bogs by Glencorse Wood and Inverness Copse. They lay by upturned tanks and sank in the slime. Queer how the fellows used to drop and never give a sound, so that their pals passed on without knowing. In all sorts of places the unknown warrior lay down and was not quickly found. In Bourlon Wood they were lying after the battle among the river trees. On the fields of the Somme they lay in the churned-up earth, in High Wood and Delville Wood and this side of Loupart Wood. It was queer, one day, how the sun shone on Loupart Wood, which was red with autumn tints. The old Boche was there then, and the wood seemed to have a thousand eyes staring at our lines, newly dug. An airplane came through the fleecy sky, wonderfully careless of the black shrapnel bursting about it. Wonderful chaps, those airmen! For a man afoot it wasn't good to stumble in that ground. Barbed wire tore one's hands damnably. There was a boy lying in a tangle of barbed wire. He looked as though he were asleep, but he was dead, all right. The airplane passed overhead with a loud humming song.

What is this long silence, all this crowd in London streets, two years after the armistice and peace? Yes, those were the old dreams that have passed, old ghosts passing down Whitehall among the living.

The silence ended. Some word rang out; the bugles were blowing. They were sounding the "Last Post" to the Unknown Warrior of the great war in which many men died without record or renown. Farther than Whitehall sounded the "Last Post" to the dead. Did the whole army of the dead hear that call to them from the living? In the crowd below me women were weeping quietly. It was the cry from their hearts that was heard farthest, perhaps. The men's faces were hard, like masks, hiding all they thought and felt.

The King stepped forward again and took the wreath from Lord Haig and laid it at the base of the cenotaph. It was the first of the world of flowers brought as a tribute of living hearts to this altar of the dead. Admirals and Generals and statesmen came with wreaths, and battalions of police following, bearing great trophies of flowers, on behalf of fighting men and all their comrades, and presently, when the gun carriage passed on toward the Abbey, with the King following behind it on foot with his sons and soldiers, there was a

moving tide of men and women advancing ceaselessly with floral tributes. They waited until the escort of the coffin had passed, the bluejackets and marines, the air force and infantry, and then took their turn to file past the cenotaph and lay their flowers upon the bed of lilies and chrysanthemums which rose above the base.

As the columns passed, they turned eyes left or eyes right to that tall symbol of death, if they had eyes to see, but there were blind men there, who saw only by the light of the Spirit and saluted when their guides touched them and said "Now." It is two years after "Cease fire!" on the front, but in the crowds of Whitehall there were men in hospital blue who are still casualties, not too well remembered by those in health. Two of them were legless men, but they rode on wheels, and with a fine gesture gave the salute as they passed the memorial of those who fought with them and suffered less perhaps than they now do.

After the ceremony at the cenotaph the procession reformed and the Unknown Warrior was borne to Westminster Abbey. There awaited him a great congregation of mourners. They came from every class and every part of the Empire. They sat without the distinction of rank as lot had arranged them places, titled ladies next to charwomen, artisans by city merchants, for all had equal title to be there, the gift of a son or brother to the country.

At the door leading to Parliament Square, Bishop Ryle, Dean of Westminster, in a purple and gold embroidered cape, with his Canons and choir, met the body. It was carried shoulder-high by eight tall Guardsmen, and on the war-worn Union Jack that covered it lay a shrapnel helmet, a crusader's sword and a wreath of laurel. Through the transept lined with statues of statesmen, and past the high altar the Unknown Warrior was borne, and then through the choir into the nave, where already many famous fighting men slept. Just within the west door, a great purple square, bordered with white, marked the site of the grave.

It is in the pathway of Kings, for not a Monarch can ever again go up to the altar to be crowned but must step over the resting place of the man who died that his kingdom might endure. Four ladies sat apart and rose to greet this great Unknown, Queen Mary and Queen Alexandra of England,

Queen Maud of Denmark, and Queen Victoria of Spain, and behind them were grouped Princess Mary and other women of Royal blood. Waiting, too, near his grave, were men of the Warrior's own kind. He passed through ranks of soldiers, sailors, airmen and civilians in mufti, strangely mixed; Captains stood next to seamen, Colonels by enlisted men, for all wore the Victoria Cross, and that earned them the right to attend.

The mournful strains of the Croft Purcell setting of the funeral sentences were chanted, unaccompanied, as the procession passed through the Abbey, and as the grave was reached, the King, as the chief mourner, stepped to its head. Behind him stood the Prince of Wales, the Duke of Connaught and other members of the Royal family, and ranked in the rear were Lloyd George and Asquith, the two war Premiers, and the members of their Cabinets, three or four Princes from India and a score or more of the leaders of British life. The pall-bearers, chiefs of the army and navy, Haig, French, Beatty and Jackson among them, took their stand on either side of the coffin, and the service began.

It was as simple as in any village church in the land.

The Twenty-third Psalm, "The Lord is my Shepherd," was sung to the familiar chant, and then came the account read by the Dean from Revelations of the "great multitude, which no man could number, out of every nation, and of all tribes, and of all peoples and tongues, standing before the Throne."

As the coffin was lowered into the grave, "Lead, Kindly Light," was sung, and then came the committal prayer. As the Dean spoke solemnly, "earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the King, as the chief mourner, stepped forward and from a silver bowl sprinkled the coffin with soil brought from France. A few more prayers, "Abide With Me" and Kipling's "Recessional" concluded the service, and as the words of blessing died away, from far up among the pillared arches came a whisper of sound. It grew and grew, and it seemed that regiments and then divisions and armies of men were on the march. The whole Cathedral was filled with the murmur of their footfalls until they passed and the sound grew faint in the distance. It was the roll of drums, and seemed to symbolize that host of glorious dead which has left one Unknown Warrior forever on guard at the entrance to England's old Abbey.

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